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AUTHOR O'Keefe, Marty
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ABSTRACT

A survey of 49 colleges collected information about freshman wilderness orientation programs. Questions covered: (1) program goals; (2) activities to reach these goals; (3) follow-up goals and activities; (4) evaluation methods used; and (5) role and training of leaders. Institutional goals included program goals, personal growth goals, and social skills goals. Programs were categorized into three models. Programs in Model I emphasized the role of the student leader, the importance of having fun, and the importance of establishing a peer group of friends. Programs in Model II emphasized the role of faculty, decision-making skills, small group skills, and the development of peer group identity. Programs in Model III emphasized the connection between the wilderness orientation program and academic persistence, the important role faculty play in the process, the desire for freshmen to adjust and mature through the process, the development of group problem-solving skills, and the desire to reduce stereotyping. Program follow-up and evaluation components were not well documented. Recommendations stress the importance of program evaluation. (KS)

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FRESHMAN WILDERNESS ORIENTATION PROGRAMS: MODEL PROGRAMS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

By

Marty O'Keefe, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor, Unity College
Unity, Maine

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ABSTRACT:

Freshman wilderness orientation programs across the country vary in philosophy, goals, activities utilized to achieve those goals, follow-up goals and activities, evaluation methods, and role and training of the leaders. Programs from across the country participated in a recent study that collected, described and organized the current freshman wilderness orientation programs with respect to the above components.

Introduction

All college orientation programs are considered an integral part of the introductory process for freshmen. The success of any program can have a dramatic effect on the quality of students' first year at college, as well as in subsequent years. As higher education today is being challenged to be accountable for the process of education and the development of better citizens, so too are orientation programs scrutinized for their quality and long range effectiveness.

One unique orientation program is the freshman wilderness orientation program that has been developed at colleges and universities across the country. The wilderness orientation programs vary from college to college, but all utilize a variety of wilderness settings, and activities within those settings, to reach their orientation goals. Backpacking, canoeing, bicycling, rock climbing, ropes courses, city trips, group initiatives, and solo experiences are just a few examples of the experiences utilized within wilderness orientation programs to reach individual program goals. The goals vary with each program, depending upon the focus of the college. According to Gass (1984), the reasons for the development and continuation of these

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rograms at colleges vary from the aim of reducing the attrition rate, to promoting a more positive transition to college life, and to introducing students to the college's outing program.

The utilization of a wilderness environment for educational purposes has evolved within a wide range of programs in agencies, camps, high schools, colleges, and universities. Programs in the fields of corrections, mental health, physical rehabilitation, and education utilize group involvement and challenging activities in a natural environment to reach their goals. They are not necessarily attempting to educate for the environment, but through the environment. These programs are designed to promote the development of skills in the areas of decision making, communication, problem solving, increasing self-confidence, positive group interaction, handling stress, being able to take responsibility for actions, and many other skills.

Colleges seek to provide their students with the skills to be knowledgeable, productive, and growing individuals. Freshman orientation provides the first opportunity to develop these skills.

The freshman wilderness orientation programs at colleges across the country vary in purpose, setting utilized,, leadership personnel, activities, follow-up component, and evaluation procedure. All the programs are interested in providing the best possible introduction to each particular college. "While the use of wilderness orientation programs has grown, research into the effectiveness of these programs has been limited. Most of the studies conducted have suffered internal and/or external validity problems (Kelly, 1972; Springer, Sullivan & Williams, 1974; Wells, 1975; Dawson, 1976; Wetzel, 1978; Johnson, 1986) or have focused on serving as program descriptions (e.g. Raiola, 1984; Gilbert, 1985; Gass, Kerr & Garvey, 1986)." (Gass, 1987, p. 6)

The purpose of the O'Keefe (1989) study was to collect, describe, and organize as much information concerning these programs as possible. Examining, organizing and describing the commonalities and differences among the programs adds to the documentation of the positive impact that many educators believe these programs have on participants in achieving personal and social skills that will contribute to their overall education and that will eventually be carried over into the work place.

The following represents the summary of the findings of the O'Keefe (1989) study. The findings represent the broad spectrum of wilderness orientation programs across the country.

The Survey Study

A survey instrument was developed, piloted, and sent to 58 colleges across the United States. The purpose of this instrument was to collect information to be able to describe in detail what freshman wilderness orientation programs are doing with regard to goals; activities to reach these goals; follow-up goals and activities to the experiences; evaluation methods utilized with these programs; and personnel, role, and training of the leaders for these programs. A three-round Delphi technique was utilized to collect the information from the colleges. Forty-nine colleges responded to the first round of the study. Twenty-two colleges participated in all three rounds of the study.

Background

The following summary of the background information provides a good description of general make-up of wilderness orientation programs.

1. There is a nearly equal number of small and large colleges (13 and 11 respectively) which offer wilderness orientation programs.

2. The participants reported the Student Life office and/or faculty members are responsible for directing the wilderness orientation programs.

3. Twenty of the forty-nine colleges participating in the study reported no longer provide the wilderness component for their orientation programs. The two main reasons for the termination of these programs are finances and lack of personnel either properly trained, interested, or compensated.

4. The average length of time these programs have been in existence is eight years, with the longest program operating for 40 years. Fifty percent of the programs have been operating between one and five years.

5. Half of the wilderness orientation programs serve less than 50 freshmen per year.

6. Almost half of the programs serve between one and ten percent of their entering freshman class. Three programs serve over 80% of their

entering freshman class, which represents 95, 620, and 850 students.

7. The length of time programs have freshmen in the wilderness varies from one day to one month. The majority of programs have students in the field between four to seven days.

8. The majority of programs operate just prior to the fall semester.

9. The majority of programs do not offer credit for the freshmen. The programs that do offer it as Physical Education, Outdoor Education, Interdisciplinary, or Orientation credit.

10. The cost of wilderness orientation programs ranges from nothing to $1200. The majority of the colleges charge between $50 and $200.

Philosophy

The philosophical base from which these programs develop has an important impact on the programs themselves. The participating programs have somewhat of a common base. The following thoughts/issues relate to the philosophical base of the programs participating in this study.

1. Thirty-five percent of the participating colleges utilized goal statements in place of philosophical beliefs as the base of their program.

2. Nineteen percent of the participating colleges have a prepared philosophical statement for their program.

3. The philosophical statements listed by participating colleges revolve around the belief that students learn through experience; the use of challenge is important in the learning process; there is value in utilizing a wilderness setting; it is important to foster in students self-reliance, confidence, and a willingness to challenge themselves physically, emotionally, and academically, and that there is a need for the opportunity to build a core support group of friends.

Goals

Collecting and organizing the various goals of participating colleges was one of the main purposes of this study. The researcher felt that the underlying goals of the programs would give a good indication of the purposes of the programs and possibly the role of the programs play at the various colleges. It was found that freshman wilderness orientation program goals fall into groupings most effectively illustrated in model form. Models illustrating the similarities and differences between programs were organized and presented to the participants for evaluation. The following represents the final findings.

The goals that all models share are:

Program Goals:

1. Have fun.
2. Smooth out the transition from high school to college.
3. Transfer skills and ideas from the wilderness setting to the college setting.
4. Develop a positive connection with the college as a whole.

Personal Growth Goals:

1. Increase their confidence.
2. Better understand their strengths and weaknesses in coping with stress.
3. Increase self-esteem.
4. Assume responsibility for themselves and their own choices.
5. Enhance communication skills.

Social Skills Goals:

1. Develop a positive interaction with peers.
2. Learn to work with others.
3. Develop trust in others.
4. Gain a sense of community early on in college.

5. Develop acceptance of others.

The following differences between the models are also important and highlight the breadth of options available for wilderness orientation programs:

Model I:

1. Six programs are represented in Model I. Five out of six utilize student leaders with four of the five being led strictly by students.

2. The length of the wilderness experience for these programs averages five and a half days, the longest being eight days.

3. The training time for the leaders of these programs averages four and a half days for four of the programs. One other participant was very vague and another listed an intensive leadership training program.

Additional goals for Model I include:

Program Goals:

1. Develop peer group identity.

2. Gain information about the college.

3. Introduce students to the outing club.

Personal Growth Goals:

1. Adjust and mature.

2. Enhance decision-making skills.

3. Increase personal initiative.

Social Skills Goals:

1. Establish friendships for the next four or more years.

Model II:

1. Six programs are represented in Model II. All six utilize student leaders in conjunction with either faculty and/or staff from the college.

2. Four of the programs average six days for the wilderness experience, one program being out for 12 days and another for one month.

3. The leadership training time varies from one program not having any specific training for its leaders, to two of the programs providing semester long training programs. Two other programs provide training for three days, and another program provides training for ten days. One program specified what training it provided for its faculty involved in the program.

Additional goals for Model II include:

Program Goals:

1. Develop positive interaction with faculty.

2. Develop peer group identity.

Personal Growth Goals:

1. Enhance decision-making skills.

Social Skills Goals:

1. Learn small group skills.

Model III:

1. Seven programs are represented in Model III. All seven involve student leaders, with two of the programs utilizing student leaders only, and the rest involving the student leaders with faculty and/or staff.

2. Four of the programs average five and a half days in the wilderness, two programs average 20 days, and one program is in the wilderness for three days.

3. The leader training time varies: one program's training for two days; two programs are for approximately eight days; two programs

for three to five weeks; and two programs are for a semester.

Additional goals for Model III include:

Program Goals:

1. Improve retention.

2. Develop positive interaction with faculty.

Personal Growth Goals:

1. Adjust and mature.

Social Skills Goals:

1. Develop group problem-solving skills.

2. Reduce stereotyping.

3. Establish friendships for the next four or more years.

In summary, programs represented by Model I seem to emphasize the role of the student leader, the importance of having fun on the trips, and the importance of establishing a peer group of friends before school actually starts. These programs do not feel that the introduction of academic disciplines, retention, or discussion of intended majors or careers belongs as part of a wilderness orientation program. Programs in Model II emphasize the importance of the role of faculty, the improvement of decision-making skills, small group skills, and development of peer group identity for the freshmen. Programs in Model III emphasize the connection between the wilderness orientation program and retention, the important role faculty play in the process, the desire for freshmen to adjust and mature through the process, group problem-solving skills, and the desire to reduce stereotyping.

Activities

The participants listed activities that they utilize to reach the various goals of their programs.

1. Thirty-one percent (eight out of 26) of the participating colleges do not list any specific activities aimed at reaching their goals.

2. Nineteen percent (five out of 26) of the participating colleges list vague and non-specific activities to reach their goals.

3. Fifty percent (13 out of 26) participating colleges list both the goals and activities to reach each goal.

Leadership

There are some commonalities and differences in how the programs address leadership.

1. Student leaders play an important role in most of these wilderness orientation programs.

2. The variety of depth of training of these student leaders is tremendous. Some programs put a great deal of time, energy, and money into the training of their leaders. Some programs have virtually no training for their leaders.

3. The length of training time varies widely from none, to semester courses with extensively developed training criteria.

4. Approximately half of the participating programs pay their leaders. The pay varies widely.

5. There is a fairly consistent leader-to-student ratio provided by the programs (one leader to four or five students).

6. There is some agreement on the topics for training. The topics that the participants agreed on focused on leadership skills, and the topics they could not agree on focused, for the most part, on technical skills.

7. Many of the participating colleges that utilize faculty personnel in the leadership role do not specify how the faculty are trained or whether they are a part of the leadership training program.

Follow-up

The follow-up component of the wilderness orientation programs is not well documented. The following represents the findings in this area.

1. Forty-six percent (12 out of 26) of the participating colleges did not respond to the initial request for the goals and activities of their follow-up component of their wilderness orientation programs.

2. Of the fifty-four percent (14 out of 26) of the participating colleges who did provide answers, thirty-six percent (five out of 14) of the responses were vague and non-specific.

3. There is more agreement on the goals appropriate for follow-up than the activities to reach these goals.

4. Many participants believe that follow-up is important but are not able to articulate or demonstrate how to achieve quality follow-up experiences for their program.

Evaluation

The evaluation component of the wilderness orientation program is not well documented. The following represents the findings in this area.

1. There is very little mention of techniques or tools to evaluate the programs for long term costs or benefits.

2. The evaluation tools listed as examples by the participating colleges are utilized immediately following the programs.

3. Two colleges sent evaluation results from studies they had completed concerning their wilderness orientation programs. However, these studies were single attempts and are not accomplished on a yearly basis.

4. Many participating colleges believe evaluation is an important aspect of freshman wilderness orientation programs, but are not able to articulate or demonstrate how to achieve quality evaluation for their programs.

Recommendations for Wilderness Orientation Programs

1. It is important for the integrity, accountability, and development of wilderness orientation programs that a defined, specific,

and written philosophy be developed for the programs.

2. It is just as important to have a well thought out list of goals and objectives to actualize the philosophy of the program. Specifically, programs need to address the issue of whether topics concerning academic and career goals should be a part of their programs, and then, if so, activities need to be developed to achieve those goals.

3. Goals are only as good as the activities utilized to reach those goals. The mountains will not speak for themselves. We need to consciously program for what we feel is important for the freshmen to experience just prior to and throughout their first year in college.

4. The leadership component of these wilderness orientation programs is one the utmost importance to their success. More time and energy needs to be put into an assessment of needs of the leaders, development of a comprehensive leadership training process, and evaluation of the training and the leaders themselves. There were participating colleges that made a point to mention the benefits they felt the student leaders receive from participating in their wilderness orientation programs. More work needs to be done to capitalize on the potential benefits for the student leaders.

5. There needs to be a paid director for the wilderness orientation program. Many programs have been dissolved because of the lack of qualified and compensated directors. It is a big and important job.

6. There needs to be budgetary reviews so that programs have adequate funding to provide a quality experience for both the freshmen and the leaders.

7. Faculty and staff need to be involved in the program. Their involvement will assist with follow-up and how comfortable the freshmen feel throughout their first year.

8. There needs to be more emphasis placed on the follow-up component of the wilderness orientation program. Research is showing the importance of this aspect of programming. More follow-up techniques need to be developed and tested.

9. There needs to be more emphasis placed on the evaluation process of these programs. It will serve many purposes: input for future programming needs, input for the instructors and their development as leaders, and input for the college and whether this is a viable and meaningful way to reach their orientation goals. There needs to be a longitudinal look at the program as well as immediate evaluation.

10. We need to continue to network as a group educators, sharing our successes and failures in order to provide the best possible programming for the freshmen we all work with.

Final Comments

In this study, considerable descriptive information was collected and organized to better understand the breadth of freshmen wilderness orientation programs across the country. In addition, this research has raised further questions concerning the effectiveness of such key program components as evaluation, follow-up, and leadership training. Clearly these issues must be addressed to enhance the professional status of wilderness orientation programs and outdoor education within the larger field of higher education.

Program evaluation is an area of critical importance, yet for many respondents to this study evaluation is non-existent or inadequate. Many program directors do not know if their goals are being met because there are no effective evaluation procedures providing this information. Critical evaluation of the success or failure of these programs over time requires more than simply intuition. Data form proper evaluation techniques can provide valuable information for program development, as well as justification of the program's worth to college administrators. Quality evaluation could also be beneficial to a wide range of other outdoor education programs.

In order to accomplish the goal of transferring skills from the wilderness setting to the college

setting, leaders must be trained to facilitate this transfer. Some questions that need to be raised by program directors concerning leadership include: Should students fill the leadership role, and if so, what training is necessary to provide leaders with the facilitation skills needed to fulfill that role? One way to continue using student leaders who do not necessarily have extensive group facilitation skills, would be to significantly increase the role of follow-up programming.

Presently, follow-up programming is a component of freshman wilderness orientation programs that receives little attention, yet program directors suggest that it is important for the enrichment of their programs. If freshman wilderness orientation programs were viewed as one component of the overall freshman experience, and an extensive follow-up program were developed, the transfer of skills from the wilderness setting to the college setting could be achieved by utilizing college professionals with the appropriate facilitation skills. Clearly both the leadership training and follow-up components of freshman wilderness orientation programs also need critical evaluation.

One disturbing finding from this study was that 20 out of 58 (34%) of the programs contacted are no longer in existence. This researcher believes that this attrition is connected to misconceptions and a lack of understanding about outdoor education and experiential education. Outdoor educators have been less successful in articulating the purpose and philosophy behind wilderness orientation programs to the public, academic administrators, staff, faculty, and students. It is imperative that efforts are intensified to educate others about the scope, goals, and role of outdoor education within the education system as a whole.

This investigator believes that the field of outdoor education is at a crossroad. Up to this point, outdoor educators have been poor advocates, researchers, and educators beyond their own field. It is time for a new stage in the development of outdoor education in general, and wilderness orientation programs in particular. Being accountable and responsible for the philosophy, goals, and means by which the goals are accomplished will help foster a commitment from administrators to support wilderness orientation programs with financial support, personnel, and other college resources. Finally, it is important to reach beyond the narrow world of outdoor education to all educators, to educate others about the benefits outdoor education can offer to the development of quality higher education.

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